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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [ET](#) [ER](#) [SU](#) [SO](#)
SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER MELES ON REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons: 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

¶1. (C) Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told visiting USUN Ambassador Susan Rice May 16 that over the long term normalization of relations with Eritrea will guarantee a peaceful demarcation of the border. Meles also acknowledged to former U.S. mediator Rice that Ethiopia made mistakes in handling the war with Eritrea. On Sudan, Meles said Eritrea's involvement there and in Somalia were unhelpful. Sudan will remain a challenge for Ethiopia's security and the ability of the SPLM to remain a cohesive group will also determine whether Sudan's stability can be preserved. End Summary.

Hope for Eritrea's Future

¶2. (C) In a visit by the first Cabinet level official from the new Administration, Prime Minister Meles underscored to USUN Ambassador Rice during a six-hour meeting that the most deadly phases of border conflict with Eritrea may have been avoided. The outbreak of hostilities in 1998 between Eritrea and Ethiopia was never about the border dispute in Badme and Zelambessa. It was about economic and political differences. President Isaias was sending a message to Meles and Ethiopia to comply with Isaias' view of the conduct of bilateral relations which would make Ethiopian interests on economic development, trade and political relations subservient to Isaias' wishes. Meles said, if Ethiopia had made it clear to Isaias that he had crossed a line which would drive both countries to war and worked harder to force Eritrea to respect the relationship, then all-out war might have been averted. Both countries made serious mistakes and bitterness on both sides forced positions to become unnecessarily intractable. Meles noted that after conflict broke out and the cessation of hostilities agreement was negotiated, a 26 mile buffer zone located in the Eritrean side was advocated by hard-liners on the Ethiopian side only as a means to humiliate Isaias. It was never an effective mechanism to enhance security or to keep the parties separate in a peaceful manner. The proof came in 2007, when Eritrea eliminated the security zone, bringing Eritrean forces up to the Ethiopian military positions. This indicated clearly that the security zone was a useless measure and did not ease tensions nor enhance efforts to avoid future conflict.

¶3. (C) Isaias has become vilified within his own country for the hardships he has brought upon his people. Despite his rogue actions supporting extremists in Somalia and destabilizing Sudan, Isaias has calculated that the U.S. and other countries would consider Isaias more of a headache than a threat. Meles suggested the Isaias' calculations would be shattered, if the U.S. and others imposed financial sanctions on him and particularly cut off Isaias' funding from Qatar

and other countries and the important funding from the Diaspora in the U.S. Isaias still imposes a mandatory 2 percent of salary tax on all Eritreans living overseas. Non payment results in family members in Eritrea being denied food ration cards. Meles suggested the U.S. could approach Isaias privately to try to change his behavior, armed with the threat of sanctions, and determine his response. Any public statement or public threat would not work with Isaias. These sanctions could be important to press Isaias on his responsibilities to the international community, and to indicate that his actions would not be tolerated.

14. (C) Meles said Ethiopia's military expenditures in 1998 accounted for 10 percent of GDP. It is now less than 1 percent of GDP which includes payment for the mobilization of troops along the Eritrean border. Meles said he could maintain such forces indefinitely. Isaias, however, is expending a large amount of his GDP for Eritrea's military posture. This constant military pressure along with financial sanctions could be the effective pressure points on Eritrea to compromise. Meles said that eventually Ethiopia and Eritrea will need to normalize relations. This should be the basis for the peaceful demarcation of the border. While not stated in the Algiers Peace Accord, Meles said normalization of relations must be a condition for demarcation. Demarcation without the prospect of peace negates the purpose of demarcation.

Sudan Challenges

15. (C) Meles has consistently stated that instability in Sudan poses major threat to Ethiopia's security. Noting the corruption within the Bashir regime, Meles said Sudan and Ethiopia have an understanding that Ethiopia and Sudan will not challenge each other nor interfere in each other's internal stability. Meles noted, however, that Sudan could deteriorate into internal conflict. One challenge is the unity of SPLM. There can be no peace in Sudan without the SPLM, and a divided SPLM will only contribute to greater instability in Sudan. Meles commented that he did not characterize the situation in Darfur as genocide, because genocide depends on "intent." While Meles recognized the massive human rights abuse in Darfur, he concluded that many of the deaths in Darfur was from starvation. The far greater genocide argument occurred in with the killings directed against the south.

Comment

16. (C) Meles has consistently told us that Somalia under Shabaab control poses a national security threat to Ethiopia; however, the instability in the Sudan and the failure of the CPA process would pose an even greater security threat to Ethiopia. Ethiopia's leadership also recognizes that there can be no permanent peace and security for Ethiopia without final resolution of differences with Eritrea, since it is Eritrea that is proving to be the regional spoiler in an effort to stoke instability and undercut Ethiopian security. End Comment.

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